Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood

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10 January 2014

For the last 5 years, I have been engaged in studying the spiritual formation of emerging adults at Gordon College and after graduation. Consistent with a recent study carried out by the Center for Scripture Engagement at Taylor University, I found that students at Gordon have a high focus on God, on the Bible, and on practices of the faith (about the same level as students at other Christian colleges). They also show high levels of spiritual connectedness, outreach, and concern for others. Gordon, as we know, nurtures the development of a solid, engaged faith. Yet, emerging adulthood is a time of greater stress than ever before, making faith development particularly challenging at this time in the life span.

According to Jeffrey Arnett, emerging adulthood is a distinctive life era that occurs between ages 19 and 29. Emerging adults, who may be pursuing higher education, living outside the home, and not married, have some of the characteristics of adulthood but nevertheless often report that they do not yet feel like adults.

Emerging adulthood, as it now exists, did not exist 30 years ago, and will probably not be the same 30 years from today. It is a life era that has resulted from cultural change, caused by higher expectations for education and excessive beliefs in the values of individualism and mass consumerism. The symbols of this generation too often are narcissistic consumer-oriented gender-bending individualists like Justin Bieber, the Kardashians, and Lady Gaga. Social media has taken the place of family meals in their socialization, and emerging adults have unprecedented freedom for exploration in identity and faith. Christian emerging adults face many of the same challenges as other emerging adults, and are not protected from the stresses and changes.

Most emerging adults do well, however, but this is not an easy time, full as it is of transitions, challenges, and unknowns. Surprisingly enough, in contrast to cultural beliefs that emerging adults are highly independent, relationships are really important for them. Parents are as important as peers for their well-being, particularly in the sample of emerging adults that I study (Christian college students), and faculty fill pivotal roles in their development.

Christian Smith, in a massive study exploring religious belief in emerging adulthood, shows the impact of individualism and consumerism on emerging adult faith. He believes that, in response to having an overwhelming array of choices, many emerging adults have formed a parasitic, watered-down faith in which God is viewed as “a Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he’s always on call, takes care of problems, professionally helps people feel better about themselves, and does not become too involved in the process.” He calls this faith “moralistic therapeutic deism” because these emerging adults see God as a source of moral rules (moralistic), a problem-solver (therapeutic), and distant (deistic). The challenges for all of us in nurturing spiritual formation are immense.

With these and other questions and concerns in mind, I designed a series of studies about spiritual formation. In the first, a Wheaton professor and I carried out a total of 1247 on-line surveys with Gordon and Wheaton alumni (with a subset of 120 alumni doing in-person interviews). In a second study, I and several current students surveyed and interviewed 60 current Gordon students. And in a third study, I and a professor at Bucknell surveyed 297 current students. It is comforting that the watered-down faith that Chris Smith sees infecting our culture does not appear common among Gordon’s emerging adults. Despite extensive exploration in faith as well as other areas of their life, students at Gordon College view God as personal not distant, and loving not punitive and harsh.

Asking questions is endemic to emerging adulthood, and even those emerging adults who ask a lot of questions about faith can be solidly grounded in faith. One study showed that those who have faith but also ask questions did not differ from those who have faith and don’t ask questions, although those who ask questions experienced more stress. Their questions, though they may be about faith, are often at their core more about personal identity than faith, which can be quite solid. These emerging adults may wish (with their parents) that they could settle into their home church but find instead that they cannot because their lives are too chaotic. It is a relief to find that many of these question-filled emerging adults settle down in faith when they are well into their twenties, a process that is facilitated by the Christian college context. Gordon self-consciously seeks to provide guidance in how to think about complex questions. It also provides close relationships with peers and faculty which help to nurture student development.

In the process of their spiritual formation, emerging adults need to become more active in living out their own faith. My research shows that students become more active in their faith as they become juniors and seniors at Gordon. In many ways, Gordon College helps them take more responsibility for their faith, for example, by faculty conversations, Bible studies, mission trips, and friends in the dorm.

Further, emerging adults also crave authenticity. In interviews with emerging adults sincerely seeking God, I heard again and again the aching desire that adults listen to them and accept their seeking for authenticity, even if it leads them to different denominations or beliefs than they held when they entered Gordon. Emerging adults have told me, for example, that they identify more with “Christian faith than institutionalized religion”, a phrase that means that they are seeking and finding the heart of faith. Some feel called to convert to orthodoxy or more contemplative strains of Catholicism or more liturgical denominations within the evangelical church. This may be a good thing if faith is more authentic. The search for authenticity seems to define emerging adult faith and it can have positive results, even if the process isn’t easy.

Emerging adulthood is a challenging time of life. Christian colleges like Gordon allow faith exploration within a context where questions can be asked and frightening unknowns explored. In this context, models of mature faith can be presented and relationships nurtured which support solid spiritual formation and flourishing. Although I do not yet have the data to explore spiritual formation at secular campuses (although I’m beginning to collect it), I am pleased to see the high levels of interest in religious and moral questions among Gordon students, when the Gordon and Bucknell students are compared. Students are most likely to show mature spiritual formation, marked by a faith that is authentic and actively expressed in daily life, in a context such as Gordon.